

Interview #22

Informants: Herman Campos; Leo Doluca

(Mr. Campos is "compliance officer", USES, for San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and east Contra Costa Counties. Mr. Doluca is manager of a camp with a capacity of 375 nationals. I believe he is a small grower on the side.)

Place: Farm Labor Office, E. Fremont Rd., Stockton

Time: 10:30-11:45 a.m., Jan. 7, 1957

(The two men were already deep in conversation when I entered. I gathered that Mr. Doluca was unhappy because he had been asked by some official agency to improve certain aspects of his camp. Mr. Campos was giving him a sympathetic ear.)

Dolucan: You can't do anything with those guys. You're licked before you start. Take Mr. _____, down by Manteca. He hired a man to clean out the barracks real good, first thing every morning, when the nationals had first gone out to work. He figured that when they came back and found the barracks all clean that way, they'd get the idea. Well, what happened was that there would be a few guys who weren't going to work because they were sick or something or other. One of 'em would go out and get a whole watermelon. They would sit around in a circle in the middle of the barracks floor, crack the watermelon open by smashing it on the floor, and eat it there, leaving the rinds and seeds and juice right there. It nearly broke old _____'s heart.

Campos: Oh, yes, we could tell you plenty, Anderson. Maybe you better tell Leo what it was you were planning on doing.

Anderson: I'm in the public health field. I'm interested in hearing about the problems you have in running these national camps, because, as I was saying to Mr. Binbridge last Friday, I think maybe we can be of some help to you in drawing up an education program for these fellows.

Dolucan: It might do some good. But who's going to run it? Where's the money going to come from?

Anderson: I look at it this way. The local health departments are responsible for everything that poses a threat to the health of the communities they serve, right? Where there is no local health department, the state health department has the responsibility. Now, some of the things the nationals do are threats to the health of the American consumer who eats lettuce, tomatoes, and so forth. Many housewives don't even wash their produce before they feed it to their families...

Campos: They would if they'd seen what we've seen.

Doluca: You're damn right.

Anderson: Can you give me some "for instances?"

Campos: Mr. S _____ over in the delta had some privies, see? Well, they weren't in very good shape. You know how it is. None of us are perfect. So, we went around, and we said to him, "Look, S _____, these privies are rotten. You've got to do something about 'em." Okay, so he took a bulldozer and knocked them all down, and covered everything over with dirt. He built brand new toilet and washing facilities, concrete, and the outfit must have cost him \$5,000 or \$6,000. Now, right in back of the new set-up was a ten foot ditch, and on the other side of that was another fellow's property -- planted in tomatoes. Well, come the tomato-picking time, I got a phone call from this other fellow. He says, "What the hell's going on here? My picker's can't get into that end of the field. ~~The~~ Between the rows is all full of crap." Those nationals would rather cross that ten foot ditch and go in the fields than to use a sanitary toilet.

Anderson: I guess they aren't accustomed to using toilets in Mexico, eh?

Doluca: And you ought to see 'em do this: they'll take and wipe themselves with their hand, then they wipe off their hand with a piece of toilet paper, then they throw the toilet paper in the corner.

Campos: Honest to God, the things you see! I've seen 'em washing their socks in the toilet bowl.

Doluca: Oh, yeah, all the time. And have you ever seen this: out in the fields, they'll be picking tomatoes, ripe tomatoes you know, and their hands will get sticky and dirty. They'll take a piss and wash their hands in the stream.

Anderson: No kidding!

Doluca: No kidding. Oh, you wouldn't believe it. They're just like animals.

~~xxx~~Campos: Now, mind you, we're not saying they're all like this. But even if it's just a few in each camp, that's enough to make the camp into a pigsty overnight.

Anderson: Maybe if they're used to using a slit trench type of latrine, you ought to provide those...

Doluca: Yeah, but then the housing inspector would be after our ass. The code says they've got to be indoor type, even flush type. You can't win.

Campos: Some of the farms are using these mobile field toilets, you know...

Anderson: Yes, I've heard about them.

Campos: You've got to have 'em some places, because you will have local workers alongside of the nationals -- women, etc. But you just try to make a national use one of those field toilets! They simply won't use 'em. They'd rather go in the field, whether it's a piss or a shit.

Anderson: Do you find that as the years go by, and many of the same fellows keep coming back, that the general level of cleanliness and so forth gets a bit more advanced?

Doluca: Oh, yeah, but there's still a plenty long way to go.

Anderson: How about bathing, washing their hands, that sort of thing?

Doluca: When they first come, you practically have to drag 'em to get washed. They don't have showers, and they don't have hot water in Mexico. Like old man _____'s place, they have people at the doors of the messhall, and they inspect their hands. Won't let 'em eat unless they wash their hands. But after they've been in this country for awhile, they begin to use the facilities a little more.

Campos: Another thing I've seen many times: a fellow needs to piss, and he doesn't want to go out to the latrine because it's chilly, or he's in the middle of a card game, or one thing or another. He'll just open up the barracks window and let fly.

Doluca: Oh, you see that all the time.

Campos: Of course, when I was in the army, I saw the same thing. In fact, I saw guys go from the second story window, and it would go down into the first story window. So, I guess we haven't got too much to brag about.

Anderson: Another sort of thing I'm interested in is what they eat.

Doluca: I'll give you a typical day's feeding, at our camp. For breakfast, we give 'em two eggs, coffee, bread or tortillas, and mush or corn flakes or beans. For lunch, five sandwiches...

Anderson: Five sandwiches!

Doluca: Tortilla sandwiches -- you know, a tortilla with something in the middle, and the corners tucked up. Some will have egg inside, some potato and onion chopped up, some a piece of meat, some beans. They've got to have their beans three times a day. Then for lunch also they get an apple or orange, and a half pint (DID HE SAY PINT??? HPA) of milk.

Anderson: They go for fruit and milk?

Doluca: Crazy about it. They would drink all the milk we gave 'em. Then for supper, some kind of meat, like pig's feet or stew...

Campos: The stew has to be very dry. They don't like things swimming around in water, like soup.

Doluca: And a big pot of beans, and a bowl of chili, of course.

Anderson: How about things like spaghetti and macaroni?

Doluca: They love it. They always get something like that at night. Spaghetti, macaroni, rice. And bread or tortillas, and coffee.

Campos: Do you give 'em tortillas out of corn, or wheat flour?

Doluca: Well, you know, they have eaten corn tortillas all their life in Mexico. When they come up here, flour tortillas are a real treat. So we make that kind. We've got our own machine right out at the camp.

Anderson: How about bread?

Doluca: They aren't used to it, and don't care too much for it, but they catch on.

Anderson: I guess they're pretty big eaters, eh?

Doluca: We figure on an average of five tortillas per man.

Anderson: Per day, or per meal?

Doluca: Per meal. Some of 'em will eat as many as 15 or 20 per meal. We had one fellow out at our camp, we used to stand around and watch him, he ate so much. You remember, Campos?

Campos: Yeah.

Anderson: So, you don't get many complaints about the food, I suppose.

Doluca: Oh, sure, we get gripes. You know how it is. The food is the first thing anybody complains about, in the army or anywhere else.

Campos: Say, let me tell Anderson here about the way these guys eat. I'll give you an example of what I mean. I love pigs' feet, see, so I ask the cooks to let me know when they are serving pigs' feet for dinner so I can happen to drop around for an inspection on those nights. Well I went out to this camp, right out here, and I sat down with the fellows -- but I couldn't eat a bite. There they were, all around me, eating the pigs' feet with their fingers, and dropping the bones on the floor, down between their legs. I tell you, it was sickening.

Doluca: We have the same thing all the time. You can go right down the rows after they're through eating, and tell each place a man was sitting, 'cause there'll be a heap of garbage on the floor.

Campos: Now, understand, we don't say there's anything basically wrong with 'em. It's just that they haven't had the same... the same education we have.

Anderson: Well, this is precisely where I hope to be able to be of some help to you fellows. After my little piece of research is over, I hope to be able to draw up some suggestions as to -- well, maybe a series of talks, or movies. The printed word wouldn't do too well, I guess, because I understand many of the nationals are illiterate.

Doluca: Oh, there's various things you can do. Like I was saying, at old man _____'s place, he and his family eat right in with the nationals. So he says, these men will eat like decent, civilized human beings. They have guys at the door who inspect their hands, make 'em take off their hats, and things like that. Oh, you can do a lot of you really want to.

Anderson: There are several other things I am interested in. How do the nationals spend their off-duty hours? What do they do for recreation?

Doluca: They don't have to worry much about that. They get up at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning. After supper, by the time they get cleaned up a bit, go see if they got any mail, and one thing and another, they're ready to hit the sack. They're mostly in bed by 8:00.

Anderson: How about week-ends?

Doluca: Saturday, of course, is off when the canneries are running. We run 'em into town Friday night if they want to come. Some of 'em go back to camp in our bus, some of 'em don't. What they do in town is their own business.

Anderson: Much drinking?

Doluca: Not much. Oh, there's some, of course. Every once in a while we'll get a guy who just can't get along without his bottle, but we get rid of him fast. Guys ~~that~~ like that can't do a good day's work.

Anderson: How about women?

Doluca and Campos (in virtually the same breath): The women go out to the camps...

Anderson: The men don't have to come into town for that, eh?

Campos: What are you going to do? Throw an armed guard around the camps, spaced every ten feet? I doubt if you could keep 'em all out even then. It's like bees and honey.

(Note: I seem to recall a lot more on this subject, but I may have this conversation confused with the one with Father McCullough and Mrs. De Carli. Check the tape.)

Anderson: Ever have any trouble with violence?

Campos: Practically none. These fellows are really well-behaved. They are a model that some other people ought to look at and copy. For instance, they used to have a camp for local Mexicans out on Mandeville Island. Almost every night you would hear of a fight out there. They would wreck the joint. But the nationals are different. And another thing. They really have respect for the women. You hear how maybe a farmer's wife will be worried if she and the kids are living on the same ranch with nationals. You can take it from me, she never had it so good. She's got nothing to worry about from these fellows.

Anderson: How much pay do these nationals make, on the average?

Doluca: I've seen checks, after deductions, up to \$150 - \$200 for two weeks work.

Anderson: That's a fortune, by Mexican standards, isn't it?

Doluca: Why, sure it is. Of course, they don't take all of it back with them.

Anderson: I'd be interested in hearing what they do with their money.

Campos: The first two checks they get go back to Manma, back home. Absolutely. Then with the next check, Pappa goes down town and gets something for himself. The first thing is some clothes. They like to dress sharp, and they really know how to do it. All over the valley you'll see merchants putting signs, "Se habla espanol" in their windows. They weldome the nationals. ~~They~~ Down in some of the towns, when the nationals pull out, they're in a bad way. Just recently, we heard that the businessmen in (can't remember the name of the town) were hollering, "When are you going to send us some more nationals?"

Anderson: Many of the nationals are from the sticks, you might say, and I'm wondering if people ever try to take advantage of them -- sell them "gold bricks" and things like that.

Doluca: Say, listen, these birds are smart cookies. They right away know what things are worth, and if so-and-so's price is 10 cents higher than the store down the street, they'll call him on it. And they love to bargain you know...

Anderson: Tha 's the tradition down in Mexico.

Dolucca: Yes. We have a little comm ssary out at our camp -- shirts, socks, stuff like that -- but we don't make much off of it. The guys will come in, and if they know they can get a certain type of shirt for \$3.50 in town, they will say "\$3.50", and we can take it or leave it.

Anderson: I see. Could you give me any idea how long the average bracero remains in this country?

Campos: Well, counting extensions, and fellows coming back after going to Mexico, and so forth, I would say about six months out of the year. What would you say, Leo?

Dolucca: I think about six months, yes.

Campos: One thing you will find -- they always want to get back home for Christmas.

Anderson: Say, that's very interesting. They really put a lot of importance on Christmas, eh?

Campos: They sure do.

Anderson: Well, now, do you have any suggestions as to what you think I should be looking into as I try to prepare these educational materials we were talking about?

Campos: You want to visit some camps with me?

Anderson: Sure. This would be very important. Of course, things are a bit quiet right now, aren't they?

Campos: Yeah, but they'll pick up, when Leo, around the first of March?

Dolucca: Maybe a little earlier than that. All depends.

Campos: Now, one thing you got to remember. Many of the farmess who hire these nationals haven't had much education themselves. Many are living in housing worse than their nationals are living in. You can't just educate the nationals. You ought to think of educating the farmers and the nationals at the same time.

Anderson: That's an excellent suggestion, and I'll certainly keep it in mind as I go along.